



AMERICAN PUBLIC WORKS ASSOCIATION

Your Comprehensive Public Works Resource

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Emergency Planning and Preparedness: Federal, State and Local Coordination

Statement of

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ORAL TESTIMONY

**On behalf of the
American Public Works Association**

To the

**U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Science and Technology**

April 12, 2006

Good morning, Chairman Reichert, Ranking Member Pascrell, and distinguished members of the panel. My name is Bill Pugh, Assistant City Manager and Public Works Director for the City of Tacoma, Washington.

I am here today on behalf of APWA's 27,000 members and our nearly 2,000 public agency members. Public works officials are first responders: we clear transportation routes, we assess government and primary public buildings, we work alongside police, fire, and emergency service professionals to ensure that water is flowing through fire hoses; traffic lights are operating and traffic is moving; barricades are up; debris is removed; and the public is safe. We are often the last to leave the scene as we manage the lengthy cleanup and restoration of any disaster site.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak today about emergency planning and preparedness and the indispensable role it plays in securing the safety of our communities. APWA has been and will continue to be an advocate for the development of emergency plans which coordinate response across all levels of government in a way that saves lives, property and restores critical lifelines.

One of the most important components when planning for catastrophe is effective coordination between all of the response players. While the primary focus of such preparation has usually been centered on first-responders, it is crucial not to overlook the significant preparedness roles that are played by all levels of government, and not just the local community in which the disaster is taking place.

For example, during Hurricane Katrina, there was a total breakdown of communications between the federal, state and local levels of government. As a result, response plans were left unimplemented, and valuable time was lost trying to restore basic order to the disaster zone. This could have easily been avoided. Had many Gulf communities practiced their preparedness plans, or coordinated with other levels of government before Hurricane season, a major tragedy could have been avoided simply because one agency would have been familiar with the other's role in emergency management.

However, even the best laid plans can fail when faced with an unexpected catastrophe. This is why APWA feels it is even more important to communicate with the government at all levels, *before* an emergency, and to become familiar with the preparedness plans of others. This way, we can identify where there are bottlenecks, weak spots or other inconsistencies and then work together to develop the most efficient recovery and response plan possible.

I would like to give you two local examples where communications have worked well and not so well. First, during the Katrina aftermath, local agencies within the Puget Sound area met to plan for possible evacuees. All the local agencies attended and the State agencies were conferenced in by phone. The groups soon discovered that they had been doing very similar planning and agreed to meet together to strengthen and consolidate their efforts. Although invited, no one from FEMA Region 10 attended either of the meetings.

Second, the military bases, both McCord Air Force Base and Fort Lewis, have a major presence in the sound Puget Sound region. As such, they have the potential to offer significant resources in a major disaster. Pierce County local government has an excellent relationship with the command staff of both these bases and has entered into a mutual aide agreement with both McCord and Fort Lewis. If disaster strikes and the military forces are available, help will be also.

Disasters are inherently local by their nature. They involve men and women providing critical services to preserve public health and protect life or public property. How well they do their job depends on how well we support them. How well we support them depends on how well we communicate. How well we communicate depends on the strength of the relationship. If the relationship falls apart at the top, the men and women providing the critical services will be impacted and our citizens will suffer the consequences.

The role of the federal government is to assist local agencies when disaster strikes by providing the necessary support and resources to mitigate the disaster. We look forward to and rely upon that help. The federal government, in turn, needs to rely on the local leadership to prioritize and deploy those resources. This can only be done well if we work well together.

Now that we've all developed our local, state and federal emergency response plans, let's develop the relationships so they can be successfully implemented. Get to know your local emergency management professional. Develop that relationship and partnership. Do it soon before that next disaster strikes.

Mr. Chairman, on behalf of APWA I want to thank you again for the opportunity to testify this morning. I might also note that I have with me this morning, Deputy Chief Jeff Jensen of the Tacoma Fire Department, because, yes, we do communicate and work together within the City of Tacoma. We look forward to being of assistance to you and the subcommittee. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.